

Jeff House

# *The Grapes of Wrath* Restored: Creating Web Sites to Assess Student Learning

High school teacher Jeff House and his students revamp their study of *The Grapes of Wrath* by creating a class Web site. Students practice traditional skills such as researching, organizing material, and providing focused ideas while pursuing areas of interest such as music, film, and journalism. The project enhances their understanding of Steinbeck's classic novel as students become engaged in the story's current social relevance.

I was making lesson plans for my thirty-eighth presentation of *The Grapes of Wrath* when lethargy overtook me. Classics are so-named because they reward eternally, and so should instruction, but even Steinbeck's heady mix of biblical themes, revolutionaries, and nature on a rampage had undercut my endurance. I was creatively stagnant.

I made a short list of what I wanted this time around:

- > avoidance of the traditional novel-and-analytic-paper routine
- > heightened awareness of the book's social relevance
- > demonstration that students understood the book as more than a text

What I wanted—I decided one Sunday evening—was to build a Web site.

The value of a Web-based exercise seemed twofold. First, because the Web could handle a range of materials—photos, music, video, and writing—and accommodate elements of design, I knew the assignment could appeal to a range of skills and interests. Second, that range of skills was what I wanted to encourage. My frustration with more traditional approaches to assessment was that they required skills in a narrow field of instruction—writing alone—and narrowed the student's audience to one person—me. I felt the Web site would engage students in the traditional areas of writing—gathering and organizing material, estab-

lishing key ideas, providing a clear focus—in ways that would expand their skill development. And assessing that range of skills was a key component of the experience.

In his writings, Grant Wiggins argues that assessment involves not mere parroting of information, but a demonstration of *understanding*: “We need an assessment system that lets us know how much progress students are making toward sophisticated understandings, a system that constantly checks that students are hearing what we say and that gives them many opportunities to apply their learning in authentic tasks, get feedback, increase their understanding, and perform again” (100). This philosophy draws Wiggins and other educators to project-based instruction with assessment experiences where students do not reiterate knowledge so much as apply it. As varied in expectations as the creativity of the instructor, project-based instruction is always skills based, not product based. The end result is viewed less as the completion of a unit than as a practical demonstration of skills. Project-based assignments require a range of skills that is more varied and challenging than the rote formulas of traditional assessments.

In this context, I determined that building a Web site would enable me to assess the skills I had taught the previous three quarters in ways that would make *The Grapes of Wrath* more immediate to the students. Coming in the fourth quarter of my sophomore English composition course, the Web site project required students to employ a range of skills they had learned in the preceding quarters:

research—interviewing people in the community, tracking down printed and recorded materials, listening to speakers; analysis—isolating themes in the

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text and supplementary readings; structuring—developing a coherent presentation of historical findings, field research, and thematic study; and writing—adapting tone and style to the varied materials they would present. As it happened, the students added

ideas to the project, expanding on the skills needed to make the Web site effective.

I wanted students to react to *The Grapes of Wrath* on the level Steinbeck intended it. “I liked the book but I didn’t understand it in the same way, why it had been written, until after I saw there really are migrants downtown,” noted Tenaya Anue at the unit’s completion. “I appreciated the book’s story, but the real meaning of the book wasn’t the Joads’s story, but the story of the individual worker.”

## The Preparation

It’s a habit of mine to present ideas to my classes and then solicit feedback. After explaining the idea to the students on a March Monday, they seemed daunted but intrigued by the idea of building a Web site. Responding to my expectations for a skills-based experience, they offered additional ideas: Couldn’t they research the songs of the dust bowl as well as contemporary ballads about field workers and, even better, couldn’t they make recordings of some of the songs? Rather than merely transcribe interviews, couldn’t they film them, and if they could film them, why couldn’t they film other relevant experiences? Could they add photographs to the historical photographs they would collect?

That night I constructed seven areas of research:

- > **Books:** Students would locate texts about current and past migrant experiences, writing up their reading notes.
- > **Artifacts:** Students would locate photographs, art, and historical items about local and state migrant issues.

- > **Speakers:** Students would locate and bring to class people from the community to provide additional background.
- > **Music:** Students would collect data about relevant songs, ultimately selecting three to five for recording.
- > **Interviews:** Students would write up profiles based on interviews with persons relevant to our study.
- > **Filming:** Students would film interviews, speakers, and local events related to the project.
- > **Writing:** Students would transform notes from the above categories and polish them for presentation on the Web site.
- > **Web site:** Students would structure and design the Web site.

My intent was to make the project manageable by placing students into areas of study that appealed to them: some enjoyed reading, some liked working with digital recordings, some were musicians, some were photographers, some had strong organizational or people skills, and some loved to write. I then made sign-up sheets, determining the number of people needed in each category: five for books, seven for artifacts, two for speakers, six for music, four for filming, five for writing, and two for Web site design. These numbers, of course, can vary, but I oriented them around the interests of the students and the needs of the project (it is impractical, for instance, to put a large number of students on Web design). With the exception of about five students, all got their first choices.

I found this division of the work effective because students pursued areas of interest to them. Zach, a reporter for the school newspaper, wanted to interview workers. “I was able to interview migrant laborers and understand why they wanted to be part of that culture and why that culture was better than the culture they experienced. I interviewed a friend who as an adult helped me understand that the Joads’s ideal was better than their home in the Dustbowl.”

Bonnie, a singer, was drawn to the idea of researching and recording historical work. A fan of Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan, Bonnie saw the communal aspect of folk music as central to Steinbeck’s

theme: “Music can help people come together and actually do something. I wanted to apply Steinbeck’s mentality through music.” It was an insight that resonated with Bonnie well after the unit was completed: “That really affected me, affected my relationships, to actually have a spiritual connection which I had never really felt before or seen until the teaching of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the power of community.”

I prepared contracts for each category, specifying what students would need to produce. Students on the artifacts committee, for example, were required to gather a minimum of ten historical photographs, three objects, and ten self-composed photos; all of these had to be submitted with written data, such as subject, names, location, date, and background information; this was the raw material the writing committee would transform. Similarly, students on the books committee were required to read two texts—subject to approval by me—and then write up notes on the authors’ and books’ backgrounds, citing a number of passages that explicated key ideas. In this way, à la Wiggins, I was clarifying both the skills and the end products students would minimally need to produce. Their work was then dumped into appropriate categories in a file on the school server, allowing me to open those files and make written evaluations for grading. Each category also came with staggered due dates so students wouldn’t hand in piles of work at one time, overwhelming themselves and me.

Each committee was required to meet at least once a week outside of class, selecting a group leader who could report to me on the progress of the work. This also prevented individuals from duplicating each others’ work as the leader coordinated the areas of coverage. I would attend these meetings and give feedback as problems arose; this was particularly helpful as students often solved problems without my intervention, suggesting to each other ways to get around difficulties.

The Web site itself was turned over to the typical computer types who love computer design. But even without such students, any school’s Web site has access through its server to online assistance in building a site. Additionally, a quick Google check will provide a long list of sites explaining how to create a basic HTML document. In our case, the Web designers brought back their ideas to the

class as a whole to get feedback and discuss problems. In this way, again, the class was involved in all phases of the activity.

Evaluation involved students’ meeting two goals. First, to get a C grade, they had to meet the minimum requirements of each category (i.e., provide the correct number of required materials, such as five photos, three songs, and so forth); anything less than the minimum would be an automatic D or, in the event little to no work was turned in, an F. Grades of B or A depended on the quality of the material. Students who provided compelling material and then presented it in clearly, and correctly, written prose took top grades.

I also provided class time for each group to meet and select a chairperson who would assign out-of-class meetings and due dates for the work. These dates were kept on the class whiteboard as a reminder for both students and me.

Over the next eight weeks, I provided occasional meeting time in class, often in the computer lab, but most of the class time was dedicated to reading and studying *The Grapes of Wrath*. Though this followed more traditional classroom practices, supplemented by the committee work, the text took on deeper resonance.

## The Process

My selection of Steinbeck wasn’t serendipitous. Located in Santa Cruz, Georgiana Bruce Kirby Preparatory School is nestled in the country Steinbeck grew up in and wrote about, and *The Grapes of Wrath* is felt in the area’s history and in the number of laborers—documented and not—that spill over from the Monterey Bay area into California’s Central Valley. As we read the text, viewed Edward R. Murrow’s *Harvest of Shame*, and discussed the daily news, Steinbeck’s anger resonated. The students knew the conditions under which much of their food and clothing were locally produced. Some knew families touched by the migrant debate; some

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came from those families. It became apparent that we weren't studying just history but a contemporary debate, and Steinbeck's tirades sparked frustration that little had changed, suggesting the title we gave the Web site: *Grapes of Wrath* Restored (<http://gowrestored.com/>).

I also knew we had parents and teachers affiliated with organizations that addressed labor issues, one of whom enthusiastically accepted the speakers committee's invitation to meet with the class. As a lawyer, Alisa Thomas handled deportation problems for migrant laborers. She spoke to the students about state and federal laws, shared personal anecdotes, and answered questions they had prepared. She humanized the issue, clarifying its complexities and explaining why the discussion was making headlines even now.

The headlines, in fact, proclaimed that while Congress debated the legalities of migrant labor

during the spring of 2006, groups of laborers had planned a mass march on May 1, which, fortuitously, fell on a school day. That morning, members of the artifacts committee rushed into my room, asking if they could skip class to photograph the marchers in downtown Santa Cruz. History was alive on our streets. In retrospect, I should have foreseen the opportunity and scheduled students to follow the activity during lunch

or before school, but we are an urban school, and colleagues are pretty supportive of any activity that encourages application of instruction. "Of course," I said.

Meanwhile, a colleague asked one morning if I had heard of Luis Valdez. Yes, I had. The author of *Zoot Suit* and other plays, Valdez had worked with César Chávez in the grape fields of Southern California during the '60s, using guerilla theater to recruit and embolden laborers for the United Farm Workers union. Valdez had subsequently created El Teatro Campesino, a theater company dedicated to documenting the experiences of Chicano and His-

panic culture in the Americas. After several moves, El Teatro had settled into San Juan Bautista, one of California's mission towns, only forty-five minutes away. My colleague knew Valdez; would we like an introduction?

One student-composed letter and two weeks later, a handful of students and I met for dinner in San Juan Bautista and a performance of a Valdez play at El Teatro. A member of the troupe gave us a tour of the building, explaining photographs, papier mache masks and puppets, murals, and movie posters. During intermission, Valdez sat for a videotaped interview, explaining how his migrant background had led to a study of drama and, eventually, work with Chávez. He drew parallels to the Steinbeck text, explaining the history of migrant issues in California.

The pleasure in these experiences stemmed from the way the school community responded to the project, heightening the sense that what the students were doing had import. The music committee tracked down Woody Guthrie ballads, '60s protest songs, and contemporary work by Nanci Griffith, Bruce Springsteen, Los Tigres del Norte, and Tish Hinojosa. They dragged out guitars and keyboards, rehearsed, and made recordings. The book committee exhaustively close-read texts, citing pages of relevant passages. And the Web site committee turned class ideas about design and structure into an intricate mélange of linked pages, video and audio files, and photographs, all on a professional-looking site.

Many students valued the experience. "Six months ago I could not imagine the extent of the hardship, the tearing apart of families, the fear," wrote Naomi. "But I talked with those who experienced it first hand, those whose husbands go out to the canneries and into the fields every morning, those who came from Mexico with three others in the back of a sedan or walked tens of miles to find a place to sleep, those who employ the illegal immigrants."

Zach similarly found the alternative approach to assessment "effective in that it didn't test us on how well we could read; it tested us on how we can understand the concept and apply it in a manner that could help us deal with real world concepts."

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## In Retrospect

Like most project-based instruction, our Web site required a lot of energy and planning, and as I had never attempted this before, I adjusted as we went along. Not all students made their deadlines, and some put in more effort than others. But the payoff was huge. *The Grapes of Wrath* became relevant for these sophomores, many of them developing an increased sensitivity to the issues in their community that the book raised. The capacity of the Internet to feature a wide spectrum of media encourages students to apply more-traditional skills to areas that also include their interests and talents. This does not preclude an emphasis on reading and writing (students engaged in both activities during the quarter), but students who cannot see how analytic and structuring skills transfer from literature to their lives outside the classroom were excited to see the connection between what they learned and what they love. Put another way, I'd say that building a Web site does not replace traditional instruction; it expands and enhances it.

A secondary problem, though, involves the repetition of the assignment. I plan on building another Web site with this year's sophomores, but it seems gratuitous to draw from the same well. To

keep up the energy of the experience, I plan on revising the fourth-quarter texts each year, which, though initially daunting, allows me to adjust to the interests and current thought of our community.

Thus, this year we will study the effects of war on national culture, reading Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* and—for comparison and contrast—*The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien. War will, unfortunately, never cease to be current, but it is a particularly important topic of discussion now. Nor does the topic prevent a local angle, as our community sends off soldiers—Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, and National Guard (the local VFW has already expressed a desire to provide speakers). Finally, the Vietnam War, the subject of O'Brien's work, is a strong memory for many parents. When I mentioned the subject to the class in May, Cassandra raised her hand to tell me her father had been at Kent State when four students had been shot; would I like her to ask him to come in?

Yes, I said. I think that would be very interesting.

## Work Cited

Wiggins, Grant. *Educative Assessment: Designing Assessments to Inform and Improve Student Performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.

**Jeff House** teaches at Georgiana Bruce Kirby Preparatory School, is a consultant for the San Jose Area Writers Project, and is the author of *Writing Is Dialogue: Teaching Students to Think (and Write) Like Writers*. He lectures on writing and curriculum planning, information about which can be found at <http://www.writedial.com>. email: [jeff.house@earthlink.net](mailto:jeff.house@earthlink.net).

## READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

LISA STORM FINK, RWT

House shares a way that he took a canonical text, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and made it more engaging for students. "Designing Museum Exhibits for *The Grapes of Wrath*: A Multigenre Project" presents another project for this text. As students read *The Grapes of Wrath*, many important issues from the Depression era surface. This lesson asks students to focus on one issue as it applies to the novel. Working alone or with a partner, students create artifacts in a variety of genres for a museum exhibit that will demonstrate important facts about the research topic and its significance to viewers. [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=892](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=892)